



# Productive Meetings



Efficiency and effectiveness are key objectives of a good board meeting. Without concerted efforts, it is easy to waste time and resources, dampen members' enthusiasm and interest, and end up meeting without demonstrable results.

Assist your board in structuring meetings so they will become productive for the organization and worthwhile and interesting for the participants. By planning ahead and focusing on activities before, during, and after the meeting, you move closer to efficient meeting procedures and outcomes that meet the expectations.

## Agenda

The agenda is the recipe for the meeting. It is the tool for the chair to help guide the discussion and a reminder for the members to stay focused.

- Make sure the agenda ties in with the strategic plan. Focus on your big issues.
- Indicate which items are for discussion and which ones are simply informative.
- Separate strategic issues, resource items, and operational matters. Start with the most important questions. Indicate time limits for agenda items.
- Make a habit of including time for board development. Possible topics include the responsibilities of a board member or how to read financial statements.

- Adopt a consent agenda to leave more time for constructive debate.
- Consider ending each meeting with a brief executive for review purposes and to allow the chair to make coaching comments for the future.

## Prior to the meeting

Without due preparation, your meetings may end up aimless get-togethers. Make sure that before the meeting the following tasks have been accomplished. Think of other creative ways to get your board members ready.

- Send the agenda and attachments to all board members before the meeting and, if possible, at least two weeks before the meeting. Color code action items.
- Include all written reports describing past actions (last meeting minutes, committee reports).
- Assign a contact person for questions and clarifications for consent agenda items.
- Include a memorandum or a cover page from the chief executive listing issues for discussion.
- Assign maximum length to reports.
- Send reminder emails or make personal phone calls reminding everyone of the upcoming meeting and their assignments.
- Board members: Read the material sent to you. Come to the meeting prepared. Be ready to participate.

## During the meeting

Meetings need to be managed. Board members lose interest if they are not challenged and able to utilize their special skills. Listening to repetitive reports is not a constructive way of using limited meeting time. Make sure that the majority of the time is spent on future issues.

Here are some choices for energizing your meetings.

- Create a code of conduct for board meetings: No cacophony tolerated. No personal attacks allowed. Differing opinions respected.
- Change the layout of the room regularly to initiate interaction and contact between different board members. If you have a large board, think of how you can lay out the room to allow for small-group discussions.
- Use graphic displays as much as possible to keep all participants actively engaged and focused on the same issue.

- Have themed meetings when applicable. Serious issues warrant additional time for discussion, such as fundraising, liability issues, outreach, or board composition.
- Bring in experts to add an outsider's view. Rely on staff for information when discussing programs.
- Try to avoid overly structured and procedural meetings. Allow time for constructive and free discussion and deliberation.
- Design a colorful Stop! sign for board members to use when they have a question. It is a less intimidating way to interrupt a speaker.
- Have a resource table in the room with relevant material for board members to browse.
- Integrate evaluation of the meeting in the schedule. Use index cards for questions and comments, have everyone complete a short questionnaire before leaving the meeting room, or have a different board member observe the meeting and provide comments afterwards. Change the evaluation format regularly.

## After the meeting

Without diligent follow-up, meeting decisions easily fall into oblivion. Keep board members informed between the meetings.

- E-mail a list of assignments to each board member; copy to the chair.
- Have the chair or another contact person get in touch with board members who did not attend the meeting to discuss the meeting.
- Update board members through a newsletter of some sorts of what is happening between meetings, including results of meeting action items, press clippings, personal news items, or any other material that keeps the organization in board members' thoughts.

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Resource: *Meeting, and Exceeding Expectations: A Guide to Successful Nonprofit Board Meetings*